The Hazards of Being Religious
Hosea 6: 1-6 Matthew 9: 9-13
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There was a lot about the prophets of Israel that was ~~The prophets, all things considered, were simply embarrasing to the good people of Israel~~ distressingly embarrasing. With dogged persistance they showed up at the wrong places saying the wrong things to the wrong people. ~~They engaged in strange public antics that revealed total social insensitivity at best and madness at worst~~. The objects of their barbs and threats and warnings, more often than not, were the important people: kings, politicians and priests. They seemed to have no appreciation whatever for the decent and orderly practice of religion. ~~Fanatics is what they were and nobody of importance wanted to have much to do with them~~.

But the really embarrasing thing about the prophets was the way they had of revealing dishonesty in the lives of good and respectable people. That has always and in every age been an unpardonable faux pax. It is not a very popular activity to point to the discrepencies between what people say they believe and the way they live their lives: and to do so claiming the authority of God himself is literally to take one's life in one's hands. "So persecuted they the prophets before you", Jesus told his disciples. And as a matter of fact, the prophets of Israel were not only socially ostracized but in many instances physically banished and punished.

Let me tell you about one of those prophets, one of the most curious, but in terms of developing Biblical theology, one of the most important.

Hosea was a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BC, ~~prior to the crushing military defeat by the Babylonians and the exile which followed~~. It was a chaotic and difficult time in Israel's history and Hosea tried to make some sense of it by relating it to his own ~~unique~~ poignant personal experience.

According to the prophet, God ordered him to marry a woman by the name of Gomer who was a prostitute. Hosea and Gomer had three children ~~whom he gave strange names, "Jezreel" for the place Israel would be defeated in battle, "Not Pitied" and "not my people."~~

And then, apparently, Gomer reverted to her old ways and resumed her life of sexual promiscuity - rather embarrassing for a prophet of God. According to religious law she ~~could~~ should have been executed. Instead Hosea sent her away, perhaps sold her into slavery which sounds harsh but compared to the alternative was, in fact, an act of mercy. That should have concluded the matter. The trouble was, that Hosea still loved his wife. And so he did something unheard of: he bought her back: ~~he [illegible] to reflect [illegible] done, that~~ he swallowed his pride, his broken trust, his degraded love and reclaimed her as his wife and the mother of his children.

Now - The embarrassing thing about Hosea beyond the tawdryness of his marital experience which apparently was quite public, was the fact that he saw in his own experience a picture of God's relationship with Israel. With great tenderness he des-

cribes the early days of the covenant relation between God and his people. But after the land was conquered and the wandering tribes became a nation, the people became religiously promiscuous. The Canannites who had lived on the land worshiped nature Gods called Baalim. The Israelites joined in. ~~According to the eminent Jewish Scholar, the late Abraham Herchel, "without abandoning the cult of the God of their fathers, the Hebrews worshiped the Gods of the land they had conquered" (p 45 The Prophets)~~ In addition they forgot their dependence on the Lord God and looked to military strength and political alliances for security. All the while keeping up the pretense of fidelity to their own religion. They maintained their own sacrificial system: they kept the law. But to the piercing insight of Hosea it looked like nothing so much as harlotry, prostitution - and that's precisely what he called it.

Out of his own experience with Gomer, Hosea taught two ideas that put him in a category apart from the other prophets. Others had proclaimed God's anger and wrath and judgment. Hosea saw that God's love for his people was unending: that there is a tenderness in the heart of God that pursues his wayward people no matter how far they have strayed.

He wrote —

"How can I give you up, O Ephram!
How can I hand you over, O Israel!
My heart recoils within me,
My compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger...
for I am God and not man." Hosea II: 8-9

That was a altogether new idea. ~~It was the kind of Hosea that discovered that the "basic disposition of God toward man is love."~~ God's love for his people is like Hosea's forgiving, redeeming, pursuing love for his estranged wife Gomer. ~~—~~ a love that cannot always be contained in a religious system

The second major idea that Hosea taught was that God wants his people to be loving and forgiving and honest and righteous more than he wants proper performance of religious ritual:

> "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
> the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings"
> (Hosea 6:6)

The prophets, and they really have no equivalent in the other religions of the world, were men of faith who pointed to the tension between form and substance in religion. They were not opponents of ~~the institution~~ religion per se: they did not attack the temple, the rituals, the laws, the sacrificial system ~~per se~~; what they did was to point out, with great persistance and courage, that there is always a built-in tension between ritual and reality: between Temple and marketplace: between what people say they believe and the way they live their lives. They pointed, that is to say, to the "Hazards of being religious."

~~In the parlance of Biblical scholarship they represent prophetic religion as opposed to priestly religion.~~ A part of keeping faith with our tradition is to understand that the tension exists always; that there is a seemingly natural propensity in institutional religion to become an end in itself and of to move away from its basic ideas --

That propensity - that tension - shows up on many occasions

in the life and public ministry of Jesus. He was, apparently, a practitioner of formal religion. He went to the Temple: he taught in the synagogs: he expressed respect for religious law and custom. But recall the many instances when he disregarded the forms of religion in favor of something more important. He broke the sabbath law by healing: [illegible] But nowhere is the tension between form and substance more clearly revealed in his own life than in our New Testament lesson this morning.

Our Lord was sitting at table with some rather unsavory characters: tax collectors - those despicable people who betrayed their own nationality by collecting revenues for the Romans, and sinners - the happy pagans, the poor, common people who had no time for nor interest in the intricate formalities of institutional religion. It was not only a breach of propriety to break bread with these types, not only an exhibiton of very poor taste, it was also clearly illegal. They were unclean: formal religion prohibited having anything to do with them.

How delightful the Pharisees must have been to catch him in such a compromising set of circumstances. They placed a very high premium on the forms of their religion: they obeyed the rules: they honored the customs: they supported the Temple Standing outside the house, they addressed a simple question to the disciples: "Why?" - "Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?" Jesus overheard the question, turned and said to them - "Go - and learn what this means, 'I desire

mercy and not sacrifice'."

The brilliance of that response is that they knew very well what it meant. He had paraphrased Hosea 6:6, a verse of scripture they all would have known. He had invoked the memory of the prophet and his own peculiar religious experience. They knew what it meant: they knew well that God really did want them to be loving rather than correct: that He was far more interested in lives that were lived on the basis of love and forgiveness and kindness than He was in precise fulfillment of sacrificial and dietary and ritualistic requirements.

Institutional religion, our own included, depends for its health and resiliancy, on an understanding of the tension. The church of Jesus Christ must exist with the constant understanding that there is a natural tension between form and substance: that in a sense it is the very nature of institutional religion to become an end in itself. There is a very famous line in Pogo that goes "I have found the enemy - and they is us." That is the reality of the church. As institutions, the Church is in constant danger of idolatry - selling religion, rather than proclaiming Jesus Christ: interpreting public worship as a duty, a ritual to be performed rather than a response that wells up out of our need; encouraging stewardship as a formal obligation rather than a privilege of grace and love.

The church is vulnerable here. In his very witty and very good Screw tape Letters, C. S. Lewis presents the correspondence between two satanic underlings: one-Screwtape, giving advice to his nephew Wormwood - in the struggle to win a man's soul. In

the middle of the book the subject of their devilish attention is about to join a church and is comparing two parishes. Screwtape' advice is devastating:

> "...there is one good point which both these churches have in common - they are both party churches. I think I warned you before that if your patient can't be kept out of church, he ought at least to be violently attached to some party within it. I don't mean in doctrinal issues: about those the more lukewarm he is the better.. The real fun is working up hatred between those who say "mass" and those who say "holy communion" where neither party could possibly state the difference.. without that...the church of England might have become a positive hotbed of charity and humility"
>
> (The Screwtape Letters, p 84-85)

And the Scottish New Testament scholar, William Barclay warns that there is a type of religion that turns in on itself. ~~It may fill him with a self-righteousness which rejoices in its own superiority to those who have no like experience," he writes.~~

> "It may move a man to Pharisaic isolation, The Church must never be in any sense a little huddle of pious people, shutting the doors against the world, lost in prayer and praise, connoisseurs of preaching and liturgy, busy mutually congratulating themselves on the excellence of their Christian experience." (In the Hands of God p 40 - 41)

Now, I am not, please understand, offering an apologia for those who stay away from or attack - the Church because it is full of hypocrites. In fact, I rather believe that when it comes to hypocricy there are fewer in than out and that if a

person is honestly seeking for God and is honestly interested in being a part of his will for the world - that person will be in Church, regularly, faithfully and responsibly.

What I am saying is that theChurch must be ever mindfull of the tension in its own being between form and substance: and that the hazards of institutional religion is that it can be a substitute for that its rituals and forms can insulate us from God's will and anesthetize us from his living word.

I discovered last week a remarkable story, [illegible]s t[illegible]. Malcolm Muggeridge, well-known British intellect, journalist and broadcaster has written a little volume, Something Beautiful for God, the story of Mother Teresa of Calcutta and the missionaries of Charity, the religious order she instituted. I found myself deeply touched by the book.

Mother Teresa is a Yugoslavian nun who received papal permission to work among the poorest of the poor - on the wretched streets of Calcutta. With total simplicity of faith, with no money and no resources except her confidence that she was obeying the will of God - she left the isolated splendor of her convent and began by gathering five deserted urchins from the streets and teaching them the alphabet as well as feeding and clothing them. From that modest beginning has grown a school/rehabilitation centers for lepers - and literally a movement in twenty five cities in India and five other nations.

Always the Missionaries of Charity live with the poorest of the poor, they own nothing, they have no cloistered convent, they give their lives totally to helping, in the name of Jesus Christ, the utterly helpless and hopeless. Among Mother Teresa's those who are in no way related to formal religious institutions - -

establishments is an institution housed in a Hindu Temple called simply Home for the Dying. It is simply that: a place where the sisters bring people who aredying on the streets and in the gutters of Calcutta. Muggeridge asked Mother Teresa what she was attempting to do. She replied: "We want to make them feel that they are wanted. We want them to know that there are people who really love them, who really want them, who really want them at least for a few hours that they have to live, to know human and divine love." ~~(p 91 — 92)~~ "They are brought" she said, "to die within sight of a loving face." (p 41) 23,000 people have been brought to the Home for the Dying in Calcutta.

Children, by the hundreds, are cared for. Never has one been turned away. Muggeridge writes, "The notion that there could in any circumstance be too many children was, to her, as inconceivable as suggesting that there are too may bluebells in the woods or stars in the sky." (p 29)

~~What impressed me most, however, was Mother Teresa's response~~ When Muggeridge asked her to become analytical about her work, she said, "The biggest dieease today is not leprosy or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for and deserted by everybody. The greatest evil is the lack of love and charity, the terrible indifference toward one's neighbor, ~~who lives at the roadside assaulted by exploitation, corruption, poverty and disease.~~" (p 73-74) "For all kinds of diseases there are medicines and cures. But for being unwanted, except there are willing hands to serve and there's a loving heart to love, I don't think this terrible disease can ever be cured." (p 99)

It seems to me that in her life and in her words Mother Teresa has captured the essence of religion: religion expressed prophetically by Hosea "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice", and Jesus, "Learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice." sitting at table w/ the outcasts

Now, I am not advocating that everyone become a Missionary of Charity, nor does she. What I am advocating is the awareness that God wants - from you and me - love and mercy and kindness more than religious propriety. I am convinced that the Church is irrelevant and the faith it represents dead when it is no more than a polite Sunday morning society. Frank LLoyd Wright once designed a Church which was described in an architectural journal as having "the airy grace of a country club." God save us from that!

I am convinced that what matters to God about this Church is the love and mercy that are generated here corporately and individually. I am convinced that if God keeps an accounting of his churches the people who are fed and clothed and healed and helped will be the data on the positive side of the ledger.

As long as people die unwanted and unloved - on the streets of Calcutta - or in the isolation of residential care centers for the elderly in Columbus, Ohio, the work of God's people is incomplete.

It is a mistake to think only corporately in this regard albeit an easy one to make. For ~~Sister~~ Mother Teresa's diagnosis, that the worst disease is not being wanted or loved, knows no class

nor status nor nationality, nor is it always a corporate matter. Rather, I think it is more often than not personal. It occurs in intimate environments such as marriage and family: those places of physical closeness that make being unwanted and unloved the worst kind of hell on earth.

How often we fail - simply to be kind. How often we fail simply to be attentive and to tell our wives, husbands, children, parents that they are needed and wanted and loved. How often we get tied up in our own egotism, relishing the fact that we are needed and wanted, and failing the opportunity to give life to someone else simply by indicating that we need and want and love and depend on him or her.

The disease of being unwanted is not confined to the streets of Calcutta. ~~And there are far less dramatic, but no less important, environments for human love and kindness to find expression than the Home for the Dying.~~

The Good News of the Gospel - which Hosea sensed 800 years before Christ is that God is eternally predisposed to love us, and that his love pursues us regardless of how far we stray. The Good News - which became incarnate in Jesus Christ is that God's love reaches out - from a cross and beyond. The Good News is that we are saved not by our religion - but by that love. Sound, vital and healthy religion acknowledges, proclaims and celebrates that: and then prods us to express in our corporate and private lives the truth that God's way is mercy and love and kindness. - in the world, and in our intimate, personal relationships

Christian Religion is the response to God's love

In what is perhaps the most frequently quoted passage in the New Testament, St. Paul lists all the traditional attributes of religion: prophetic powers, understanding & mystery, preaching, faith, generosity + and concludes that "the greatest of these is love."

So as we seek to lead lives that are pleasing to God, let us "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, steadfast love and not sacrifice'." Amen.

Father, Keep us from shallow dishonesty. Make us uncomfortable with our unwillingness to love. And give us grace to care for those you have us to love - those far and near.

For your steadfast love, we give thanks: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.